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SUBJECT: GHANA VOTER REGISTRATION --LONG LINES AND SUSPECT PRACTICES

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Ghana's long delayed voter registration exercise ended August 13, marked by long lines, insufficient materials, and accusations of partisan tampering with the process. EMBOFFs toured voter registration centers in Accra, Ashanti, Central and Western regions, finding long lines of young voter registrants and an Electoral Commission (EC) often struggling to cope. Ghana's media and political parties have alleged that under-aged voters were registered, that people were bused from other regions to register, and that double registration occurred. The EC extended the eleven day exercise by two days to accommodate the larger than anticipated lines. The EC's weak implementation raises concerns about its effectiveness and provides ammunition to those who will be inclined to doubt the fairness of the December election.

¶2. (SBU) From August 4 to 9 the POL section's LES Political Specialist and ECON Section Rangle Fellow visited the Central, Western and Ashanti Regions to observe the registration exercise. The exercise was intended to allow new voters to register, and especially those who have turned eighteen since the last exercise in 2006.

Central and Western Regions:

¶3. (SBU) In the Central Region the team visited six polling stations in the towns of Cape Coast, Elmina and in rural areas. The team observed moderate lines with no visible security personnel at the centers. In Cape Coast the EMBOFFs spoke with an EC official who described how three unknown suspects allegedly disrupted a registration center and intimidated people waiting in line, claiming the would-be registrants were not from Central Region. The three also destroyed registration materials. The police responded, according to the source, but no arrests were made. In a second incident, the EC official said that underage people attempted to register. The source was not certain if these people were successful, or if a "challenge form" was completed, per EC regulations. EC registration agents told EMBOFFs about shortages of election materials and of difficulties with equipment, such as cameras.

¶4. (SBU) EMBOFFs were told by opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) officials in the Central Region that nine buses were observed bringing voters to a registration center in one of the two parliamentary constituencies held by the NDC in the region. The NDC officials had license plate numbers for the buses, some of which, they said, were operated by a public bus system. The NDC officials also reported that several of their supporters had been beaten by supporters of the ruling New Patriotic Party. The officials claimed that the police had turned a blind eye to the intimidation. The officials claimed to have a video showing intimidation tactics. NDC officials also alleged that District Chief Executives (appointed by the President) were transporting people into Central Region and assisting in their registration. EMBOFFs met with the NPP Central Region

Secretary, who admitted to the transportation of would-be registrants by his party's parliamentary candidate, but said the ensuing violence "was just a minor incident."

¶5. (SBU) In the Western Region EMBOFFs visited five registration centers, including some in the urban area of Takoradi-Sekondi and also in rural areas. EMBOFFs toured three rural stations, each of which had been without registration forms for at least one day. Despite the lack of forms, some would-be registrants were patiently waiting to enroll. In the urban areas lines were longer, and adequate materials were provided. An EC official interviewed blamed the rural shortages on the difficulty of transporting materials on poorly maintained rural roads.

Ashanti Region:

¶6. (SBU) EMBOFFs visited four registration centers in Kumasi, Ghana's second city and a stronghold for the governing NPP. They observed long lines and crowds of rowdy by-standers present at the Kumasi registration centers. In the Zongo, or Muslim section of the city, voter registration materials had run out and had not been restocked after two days. (Note: The Zongo is the only section of Kumasi represented by an opposition member of parliament). In nearby areas an official told EMBOFFs that depleted forms had been restocked within hours-- these areas had voted for the NPP in 2004. The Regional EC director told EMBOFFs that 200,000 forms had been allocated to Ashanti Region.

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Accra:

7.(SBU) POLOFF on August 7 visited two registration centers in low income neighborhoods of Accra. The registration sites had been relocated at mid-week, as equipment was shifted among districts, making it difficult to find the active centers. POLOFF observed long lines at both locations, with police officers present to watch the tired, but generally calm, crowds. Some would-be voters told POLOFF they had been waiting in line over ten hours. Party representatives at the centers reported no problems.

Comment:

¶8. (SBU) Comment. The EC was clearly unprepared for the number of would-be registrants. The EC had publicly said that it expected between 600,000 and 1 million new voters to register. The EC obtained only half of the computer and camera work stations needed for the exercise, a major factor contributing to the long lines and confusion about the location of registration centers. The allegations of registration fraud are troubling. Throughout the exercise the local media carried stories of under-age registration and bused in registrants-- reports given credence by the higher than expected turnouts. The perception-- real or not-- that the EC was favoring the NPP is especially troubling, and will provide NDC supporters with a platform from which to challenge an unfavorable election result in December. The EC has damaged its credibility as a neutral and competent body. The Chairman of the Electoral Commission, Dr. Kwadwo Afari-Gyan, on August 13 apologized to registrants for the delays in the registration process. Post will continue to report on events. End Comment.

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